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NYC rolling out 2 virtual learning programs with aim to turn them into fully remote schools by 2023

By Cayla Bamberger

June 23, 2022 6:03pm Updated



New York City is rolling a new virtual learning initiative, called "A School Without Walls," with the aim to turn it into full-blown remote schools by 2023.

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New York City is rolling out two virtual learning programs for high schoolers — with the aim to turn them into full-blown remote schools by 2023.

The new initiative, called “A School Without Walls,” will offer hybrid and virtual learning for 200 rising ninth graders this fall.

“As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is abundantly clear that our education system needs to work for our young people in a way that it never has before,” said Mayor Eric Adams in a statement.

“This virtual academy is about giving our students the freedom in their learning to explore their interests, learn outside of the box, lean into their talents, and use our city’s incredible resources as their classroom.”

Officials described the program as moving “beyond the classroom,” giving students more freedom and flexibility to earn a high school diploma.

Students will also be officially enrolled in a traditional high school, while the DOE works with the state to turn the virtual academies into full-time schools that can grant diplomas.

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Mayor Eric Adams said the virtual academy will provide students "freedom" in their learning.

Paul Martinka

"The pandemic underscored the importance of reimagining the student experience for our children, giving them the opportunity to freely pursue their interests and passions as part of their high school journey," said Schools Chancellor David Banks.

"It is up to us as educators to meet students where they are with opportunities that empower them in their learning," he added.

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Both programs will be housed within school facilities, where teachers will provide live and pre-recorded instruction using DOE equipment and classrooms.

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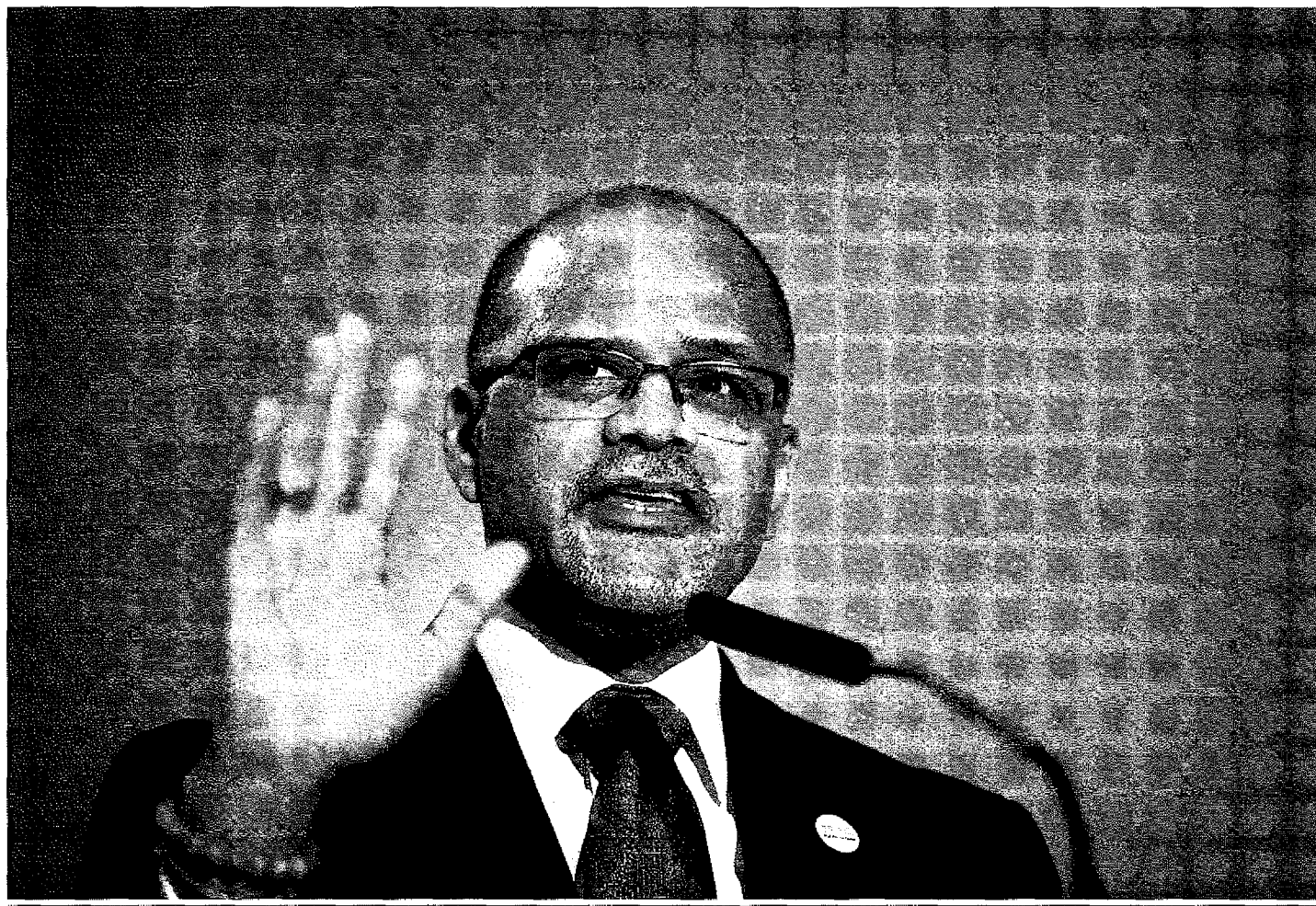
brick-and-mortar locations for technology support.

Hybrid students will attend school in person for half-days in Downtown Brooklyn, then finish their classes online.

Meanwhile, students who opt for the fully virtual model will sit for attendance and advisory in real-time, and take daily synchronous classes in the humanities, math and sciences.

This week's announcement comes after months of Banks signaling interest in virtual learning since the start of his tenure as chancellor.

"I see it as a place of real innovation," Banks said in an interview Wednesday with News 12. "We can really test out lots of different theories around technology and education."



School Chancellor David Banks said parents have expressed an interest in fully remote learning.

Matthew McDermott



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side of town for those students virtually?"



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"There are people around the world who could be teachers in our schools virtually."

The DOE also seemed poised to expand the programs to more students, if families are interested.

"I'm looking out for the response and the interest — when I find out how many parents are really interested in this," Banks said.

The city's virtual academies reflect a growing trend of more localities offering virtual options.

An analysis of the nation's 20 largest school districts by the education nonprofit Chalkbeat found that almost all of them will offer remote classes this fall — and at least half are offering more full-time virtual options than they did pre-pandemic. Those include Dallas, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Diego, Philadelphia and the suburbs of Atlanta.

In New York City, officials said "A School Without Walls" was designed in collaboration with students and responds to the asks of them and their families.

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opportunities. In the spring, student interns helped the design team shape the virtual academies, according to the DOE.

The deadline to apply is Wednesday, July 6. Students will be selected by lottery and notified of offers by mid-July.

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NYC to launch two 'full-time' virtual schools, top education officials say

'I believe that virtual learning is here to stay whether or not we have a pandemic,' schools Chancellor David Banks says.

By Alex Zimmerman | May 10, 2022, 4:27pm EDT



REPUBLIC



City officials told local lawmakers that launching the "full-time" virtual schools will be part of the solution to high rates of chronic absenteeism and re-engaging students in the wake of pandemic disruption. | Michael Appleton / Mayoral Photography Office

New York City is planning to launch two fully virtual schools, top education department officials said during a City Council hearing on Tuesday, though key details about how and when they will be created have yet to be revealed.

City officials told local lawmakers that launching the “full-time” virtual schools will be part of the solution to high rates of chronic absenteeism and re-engaging students in the wake of pandemic disruption. About 37% of the city’s K-12 students are on track to be chronically absent, defined as missing at least 10% of the school year, substantially higher than the years before the pandemic.

“I believe that virtual learning is here to stay whether or not we have a pandemic,” schools Chancellor David Banks said. He added that students should be “exposed to the best teaching, the best experiences all over the world.”

Banks has signaled since taking office in January that he’s interested in creating more permanent virtual learning options, even as the city has required all students to attend in person this school year. And, amid the Omicron surge this winter, the schools chief said he hoped to revive virtual learning as many parents kept their children home out of fear of exposure or were stuck in quarantines. But he indicated it was difficult to negotiate with the city’s teachers union and the option never materialized.

Creating separate virtual schools may help overcome one of the key problems with virtual learning during the pandemic: the task fell to individual schools to figure out how to simultaneously staff in-person and remote classrooms. Standalone virtual schools that rely on separate teaching staff would ease that burden, though it’s not clear if that is the model officials are planning.

A virtual model would likely appeal to parents who have lingering fears about the virus or whose children preferred remote instruction. It may also appeal to families whose children have more significant medical issues that make them vulnerable to COVID or other illnesses. The city’s current programming for those students typically only offers an hour a day of instruction.

Many details are unclear about the new virtual schools. City officials did not answer emailed questions about how they will operate, such as which grades will be served, when they would start, or who would staff the program. Nathaniel Styer, a department spokesperson, wrote that the department “will have more to say soon.”

Dick Riley, a spokesperson for the United Federation of Teachers, wrote in an email that the union “had some initial conversations” about the virtual schools “but nothing concrete so far.”

If students are allowed to enroll in separate virtual schools, that could create headaches for some schools and district leaders. Depending on the number of students who are allowed to enroll, the virtual schools could exacerbate enrollment problems at brick-and-mortar campuses, potentially redirecting funding from some campuses and creating more pressure to consolidate or close them. The city’s district schools have seen enrollment slide about 6.4% since the pandemic hit.

Some districts across the country, including Denver, ran virtual programs before the pandemic led to mass closures in March 2020. Denver previously offered a virtual high school option but has since expanded to cover other grades.

Philadelphia and Detroit created virtual academies during the pandemic. Los Angeles, the nation’s second largest school district behind New York City, plans to launch new virtual schools this fall. Chalkbeat previously reported that as some districts separated virtual academies from their regular schools, there tended to be less interest in them in part because there were fewer opportunities to interact with their classmates and teachers.

Before the pandemic, New York City experimented with remote learning on a small scale, including a pilot program intended to expand access to advanced coursework for students attending 15 schools in the Bronx.

Still, the education department has a mixed track record when it comes to creating virtual options. In the summer of 2020, the city scrambled to scale up a virtual

summer program built off a centralized platform. It ran into serious technical difficulties, and some teachers struggled to connect with students they had never met in person.

Tom Liam Lynch, who runs the website InsideSchools, and worked with the education department to implement a digital learning platform a decade ago, said he's confident the education department can pull off a virtual option despite previous stumbles.

The previous administration failed to create a virtual teaching strategy, he said, which hobbled remote instruction during the pandemic. Lynch noted that quickly scaling up a soup-to-nuts virtual school would likely take time, but he said even smaller-scale efforts could prove useful, including giving students access to a broader range of courses, or helping those who have struggled in traditional schools.

"Post-COVID, being able to successfully learn online is just going to be an ongoing part of what it means to be a student, what it means to be a worker, what it means to be civically engaged in society," he said. "I think the DOE is 100% capable of doing this well."

Alex Zimmerman is a reporter for Chalkbeat New York, covering NYC public schools. Contact Alex at azimmerman@chalkbeat.org.



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